

Beaver

Description:

The beaver is the largest rodent in North America. American Indians called the beaver the "sacred center" of the land because this species creates rich habitats for other mammals, fish, turtles, frogs, birds and ducks. Today we call the beaver a "keystone species" because of its importance and impacts on entire ecosystems.

How do I know it's a beaver?

Most people have a pretty good idea of what a beaver looks like, but here's a quick review. The beaver's reddish-brown, sleek coat has two different types of hair. A long, tough, guard hair repels water. Beneath this is a shorter, softer layer of hair. This "under layer" of fur helps insulate the beaver in cold or wet weather. Their backs are hunched, their necks thick, and their hind feet are webbed. A beaver's broad, flat, scaly tail measures about 10 inches long and they have two large orangish front teeth.

The average adult beaver weighs 35-70 pounds, but specimens as heavy as 90 pounds have been found. But most people don't know that 10,000 years ago there were beavers as big as black bears! Be glad you don't run into those guys in the river.

Many people confuse muskrats with beaver, but a muskrat weighs only two to three pounds and is much smaller than the adult beaver. The muskrat's tail is narrow and vertically flattened, as opposed to the wide, horizontally- flattened tail of the beaver's.

I Want to See a Beaver!

The best time to spot a beaver is in their active hours; the morning and evening. Their main activities are cutting trees for building or repairing lodges and dams. Fallen trees and stumps will show the beaver's characteristic gnawing process. With their razor sharp teeth, they chew a deep groove around the entire tree until it falls. A pile of chips is dispersed around the tree leaving peeled logs and twigs which are smooth and white. It's tough to find a beaver by looking for tracks and scat because they disappear quickly. The tracks of the large, webbed back feet are usually wiped over by the tail, and the scat of the beaver is rarely seen because it is usually deposited in water.

Nature's Engineers

By building dams, lodges and canals, beavers have an incredible ability to modify their environment. Beavers can stabilize stream flows, reduce soil erosion and create or improve habitats for other wildlife. However, they may also damage trees, block irrigation canals, or cause small-scale flooding. Beavers seem to always be building and they have come up with creative methods to make their jobs easier. Since beavers have difficulty dragging logs and branches, groups of beavers often dig large canals from the pond to a grove of trees. The canal enables the beavers to float the timber down the canal toward the pond.

Dams and Lodges

To make sure there is enough water to build a shelter, beavers dam streams using branches, logs, mud and stones. How do beavers build dams? First, untrimmed trees are laid down in a narrow part of the stream so that the trees dig into the stream bottom. Then, layers of mud and stones are laid down which mostly seep into gaps between branches. As time goes by, the beaver repairs and adds layers to the dam.

Lodges are rounded mounds built near the dam, usually between 8 and 12 feet in diameter with a height of 3 feet. Lodges are built by piling logs and branches held down by rocks and mud. The beaver then submerges in the water and gnaws its way into the mass, making access tunnels and chambers with raised sleeping platforms. If the water level rises and enters the chamber, the beaver gnaws away the roof and the detritus raises the floor. The outside of the lodge is plastered with mud leaving a ventilation hole at the top. Bark, grass, and wood chips line the floor like carpet.

They don't eat fish?

Despite their large teeth, beavers are herbivores, so they don't eat fish. They eat trees! Beavers chew on hardwoods like aspen, cottonwood, birch, and willow by rolling the twigs between their paws. In the spring and summer, they also eat new green plants. Aspen and pondweeds are their favorite natural foods. In the fall, beavers store food by cutting the trees into small pieces and stacking them near the lodge for easy winter access.

How do beavers manage to chew on all that wood? Well, because their teeth never stop growing, beavers continually have to chew to keep teeth at a manageable length. Could you imagine all the trips to the dentist if your teeth never stopped growing? Beavers are also aided by a skull with large jaw muscles that help cut down trees as large as 30 inches in diameter. Smaller trees can take only 5 minutes to cut down. A beaver's chewing force is 176 pounds compared to man's 88 pounds.

Hide From Trouble

The best way for a beaver to avoid trouble is to hide underwater. Many predators are unwilling to take the time to dig through the walls of the lodge to get at the beavers safe within. A slap of the beaver's large tail warns others that danger is near. On land, the beaver's predators include the fox, coyote, wolf, cougar, bobcat, and lynx. Despite the dangers posed by these natural predators, man has proven to be far more dangerous to beavers. Due to their dependence on water and forests, beavers are very susceptible to many forms of pollution and deforestation.

>Adapted for Water Living!



Beaver
© IDFG



Footprint
No Map
Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Beaver
2. **Scientific Name:** *Castor canadensis*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Weight: 35 to 70 lbs.
Height: less than 12 inches.
Length (head and body): 22 to 27 inches.
Length (tail): 8 to 12 inches.
5. **Diet:** Bark of aspen, cottonwood, birch and willow; some green plants.
6. **Young:** 2-4 kits per year.
7. **Lifespan:** 20 years or more.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phyla: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia
Family: Castoridae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** Yes
10. **Hunting Link:**

The beaver is a very efficient and powerful swimmer that can stay underwater for 2-3 minutes. Its streamlined body helps it glide smoothly through the water. When a beaver needs to stay under water for a long time (up to 15 minutes), it's able to slow its heart rate down so it needs less air. A beaver has valves in its nose and ears, which close automatically upon submerging. Clear membranes allow the beaver to swim with its eyes open. The beaver's tail serves as a rudder while swimming. Both males and females have pair of anal scent glands called castors which exude an oily musk (castoreum), which the beaver uses to waterproof fur as well as marking territories and attracting mates. While beavers are most at home in water, they also are capable of land traveling and do so regularly to reach nearby trees.

Reproduction and Offspring

Beavers tend to be monogamous, but if one mate dies, the other will "re-marry." Most family groups consist of two adults, several two year olds, and the young of the current year. Kits are born in April or May and can swim within a few hours. Kits stay with their colony until they are forced out at two years of age. Large lodges may even have several family groups. Family life is cooperative. All help with the hard work of gathering food, building and repair. When beavers are forced to leave the family pond, they will often travel downstream to start a new pond and life of their own.

How many are there?

Beavers have long been exploited for their fur. For many years during the 18th and 19th centuries, hundreds of thousands of beaver skins were exported to Europe from North America. Beavers were also killed because of the damage they did to forests. Beavers are found throughout North America except for the extreme northern regions of Canada and the deserts of the southwest United States, Mexico and Florida. Small numbers also live in Europe, Asia and at the tip of South America.